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ABSTRACT

A practical solution to many of the communication obstacles found in international markets can be found in the development and widespread adoption of a standardized system of international graphic symbols. Any plan to develop and implement a truly acceptable and universal system of graphic symbols will have to overcome many obstacles that past efforts in this direction have not overcome. A symbol system should be developed and introduced within the following guidelines: first, each symbol or combination of symbols and colors must satisfy basic structural criteria (each component as well as the overall system must be unique, clear in meaning, independent of language and culture, and visually direct); second, introduction of the system into practical use will have to be achieved without the benefit of preparation of often illiterate publics--herefore, initial applications should be as simple and straightforward as possible; and finally, the system's design should be flexible enough to allow for its gradual expansion from relatively simple early applications to increasingly more complex uses requiring the introduction of new symbols, colors, and eventually a symbol grammar. (MKM)

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A VISUAL LANGUAGE FOR WORLD MARKETING

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A Visual Language for World Marketing

Language differences, illiteracy, and non-linguistic cultural idiosyncracies (for example, color symbolism, etc.) often create communication obstacles in international markets not always anticipated even by the most astute and capable managers. These obstacles manifest themselves in the form of problems in package design, product labeling, advertising, product use instructions, trademark design, translation faux pas, handling and shipping instructions, etc.

A practical solution to many of these problems can be found in the development and widespread adoption of a standardized system of international graphic symbols. This paper examines major communication obstacles confronting the international marketer, along with suggestions for overcoming each via a system of graphic symbols. The present state of the art and the general degree of acceptance of graphic symbol systems for international communication use are also considered. Finally, actionable suggestions are outlined for moving toward the development of a workable system of international graphic symbols.

Communication Obstacles

Language

A key obstacle to communication on an international scale is presented by the many differences in languages and dialects. The language stumbling block is further compounded by differences in linguistic nuance and vernacular among peoples that speak the same basic language.

Dreyfuss describes the language barriers to international communication quite vividly:

> There are today some 5,000 languages and dialects in use throughout the world, of which perhaps a hundred may be considered of major importance. In most instances, intercommunication among them ranges from difficult to impossible. One solution, of course, would be to establish an international language, and hundreds of attempts have in fact been made in the last two centuries to develop an official second language that in time could be adopted by all major countries. Esperanto, Interlingua, Ido, Volapuk--all combining elements of existing languages--and Ro and Suma, both created artificially, are but six such attempts. However, among other drawbacks, they all rely, as does basic English, on the Roman alphabet. This restricts their usefulness to those countries which utilize the Roman alphabet, and these are actually a minority among nations.[1]

A more viable solution to the language difference problem is a system of symbols that would be equally recognizable in virtually any country regardless of language or alphabet. Such a system could greatly facilitate communication involved in virtually every aspect of international marketing. It could be especially helpful in situations requiring precision in the transfer of meaning, e.g., shipping and handling instructions and certain promotional materials.

To illustrate how this might work, consider the problem of shipping goods routed through several different countries before reaching their final destination. Many of the people who would be handling the merchandise in each country probably are able to read at most their own language. To insure quick and safe passage of these goods, all shipping and handling instructions could be written in each separate language. Alternatively, a visual system of graphic symbols and colors could be used instead of, or in addition to, normal written instructions. This solution is illustrated in exhibit 1. Similar symbols are currently being used by some international firms, but no standardized system exists. Handling problems have not been further abated because there is not general agreement on--or acceptance of--the use of graphic symbols with fixed meanings.

Exhibit 1 - Examples of Visual Instructions for Shipping and Handling Goods about here please

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The traditional solution to the language difference problem has been to translate all promotional messages, label information, and product use instructions into the languages of one's customers. Yet, such translations are seldom perfect or even satisfactory, which is something else all together.

A universally understood system of graphic symbols could help overcome the problems that translations present. Consider a line of clothing being sold in several countries. Consumers in each country could be provided, via graphic symbols, with easily understood basic instructions for the proper care of these products. Exhibit 2 illustrates how this might be done.

Exhibit 2 - Examples of Visual Instructions for Care of Clothing about here please

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Industrial goods represent a large share of the total international market for finished goods. Operating instructions for even the most basic of these products are both critical and often difficult to communicate. Marketing a commercial vehicle in countries where potential operators do not understand one of the common world languages (e.g., English, French, German, Spanish, etc.) requires a simple method for communicating basic vehicle operating procedures to these operators. Consider the directness and simplicity with which the symbols in exhibit 3 overcome this problem.

Exhibit 3 - Examples of Visual Instructions for Vehicle Operation about here please

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Literacy

The discussion has until now assumed that if appropriate translations are made they could then be read and understood by target audiences. That assumption, unfortunately, is seldom accurate; illiteracy is still a common condition in many countries even today. The problem of language is compounded substantially by the fact that many people in a large number of countries cannot read their own language or understand other languages. Simply translating materials from one language to another cannot cope with illiteracy.

Imagine the risks involved when illiterate dock workers in a small backwater port attempt to handle fragile cargos that are likely to suffer damage unless they are properly and gently placed upright, etc. Sales may also suffer as goods are passed over in stores and shops because consumers cannot read package information, handling instructions, printed promotional materials, or other forms of relevant consumer information.

Symbols like those already illustrated could also help overcome literacy problems simply because one does not have to be able to read to understand them. It is interesting to note that the first widely used graphic symbols served the purpose of overcoming illiteracy in the medieval European marketplace. These symbols--the barber's pole, the baker's pretzel, the pawnship's three balls, the apothecary's mortor and pestle--served to guide many illiterate visitors to a medieval European city to the shops of their choice.[5]

Color Symbolism

While language differences and illiteracy are the more obvious causes of international communication problems, there are subtle culture-specific causes as well. Take for example color symbolism. Colors can have meanings that are both culture and situation specific

People in different countries or cultures have, over time, chosen specific colors to say certain things. Often, the meaning associated with different colors varies from culture to culture. Exhibit 4, below illustrates some of the differences in meaning associated with the primary colors red, blue, and yellow.

Exhibit 4 - Symbolism of Colors Red, Blue and Yellow
about here please

Cultural differences in color symbolism can be overcome by using colors in association with graphic symbols. Constant association of a color with a symbol can help standardize a color's meaning. For instance, the colors red, yellow, and green have standard meanings virtually worldwide when used as traffic lights. Red on road signs always means "No" or "Don't" whereas blue means "Yes" or "Do."[7]

Colors can also be combined with "graphic symbols . . . to intensify their meaning," or to create "a diametric change in meaning." Dreyfuss provides the following example of the effect of color on the meaning of symbols:

> . . . a red octagon used as a traffic symbol says STOP; but when the British port of entry switches the color to green, it means permission to pass through customs unchallenged.[8]

Colors are often noticed on a symbol or design before the actual shape itself. Color can attract attnetion, and create "instant impact." Color added to a universal symbol system could act as nonverbal adjectives, modifiers, and amplifiers of the symbols' meanings.

Graphic Symbol Systems in Perspective

Graphic symbols have been used throughout history as communication devices. Many written languages began as basic grpahic symbol systems, e.g., ancient Egyptian, and modern Chinese. Graphic symbols are also being ever more widely employed in today's communication-conscious world. For example, one has only to view the dashboard of many new automobiles, especially Japanese and German imports, to see them in general use. An even wider application of a graphic symbol system is the international traffic sign system which has been standardized and adopted by many European countries.

To date, efforts to effectively develop and standardize graphic symbols have been fragmented with most successes appearing in areas of limited application such as highway signs, airport signs, technical scientific symbols, etc. There is still a critical need for a universally accepted and understood graphic symbol system with wider application potential. Given the general acceptance of the partial systems in current use, it would appear that opposition to a standard international system might be minimal.

The questions yet to be considered involve the construction of the most suitable system(s); the social costs associated with educating people to understand and use it; and the mechanisms for its standardization, implementation, and control.

Existing Symbol Systems

Several proposed systems already exist. To demonstrate the many and diverse approaches that could be--and have been--pursued in the development of a universal "world language without words" two of them (i.e., Semantography and ISOTYPE) are considered below.

One of the better known and more complete of the major attempts to create a graphic symbol system capable of overcoming the types of communication problems discussed thus far in this article has been made by Charles K. Bliss. Bliss, an Australian, calls his system Semantography, which is a made-up word that means "writing for meaning." The following concise description of the Bliss system has been provided by Elizabeth Helfman:

> Semantography is a workable system, once it is learned. It does not depend on the sounds of spoken words, and for this reason it can be used by people everywhere, whatever their language. Most of the symbols in Semantography are made up of lines that follow the outlines of real things. This makes them easier to learn than symbols that do not look like anything at all.[9]

One practical advantage of Bliss' Semantography is that it can be produced and printed with existing typesetting equipment. Semantography is ready for use if it were to be decided that this approach represents the correct path to follow in pursuit of the eventual development of a truly universal graphic symbol system.

Some simple examples of Bliss' system are provided in exhibit 5. There is a grammar to Semantography and the basic symbols can be combined to form more complex symbols. For example, if one takes the symbol for man from row 2 and combines it with the symbol for door in row 4, he obtains the symbol for doorman in row 4.

Exhibit 5 - Semantography about here please

Another quite different approach to the development of a universal graphic symbol system is ISOTYPE, developed by Dr. Otto Neurath, an Austrian. The ISOTYPE (ISOTYPE is an abbreviation for International System of Typographic Picture Education) system involves simplified or stylized pictural symbols of the objects represented. ISOTYPE pictographs are widely used in the presentation of statistics "in a comparative form . . . in newspapers, magazines, textbooks, financial reports, and business journals.[10] Exhibit 6 provides a few examples to demonstrate Neurath's systems.

Exhibit 6 - ISOTYPE Pictographs about here please

Semantography and ISOTYPE (and other systems of which they are representative) have unique as well as shared advantages and disadvantages. The more adaptable and more sophisticated of the two (Semantography) embodies a simple grammar; it also must be learned before it can be used. ISOTYPE, while substantially more restricted in its potential applicability--as it now stands--requires less special learning; its symbols are generally recognizable pictographs. There is an important trade-off between versatility and potential applications on the one hand and recognizability and ease of understanding on the other.

Educational Requirements

The principal advantages associated with even the most sophisticated graphic symbol systems are that they (unlike other written, word-based languages) can be learned by anyone, regardless of language background.

Messages written in symbolic language can be "translated" equally easily and accurately into any spoken language. Such systems could, no doubt, vastly improve international communication.

A critical limitation to the widespread adoption of such systems, however, is the extent to which they might require specially educated users. Semantography, for example, is a powerful "wordless language," but it would require substantial learning on the part of an individual before he could "read" messages written with its relatively abstract symbols, especially in situations in which multiple symbols are used in combination to express more complex ideas. Because of this "learning" requirement, the more complex graphic symbol systems would do little to overcome the obstacles presented by illiteracy; instead, they would merely provide yet another language--albeit a simpler one--to be learned. In the many countries where functional illiteracy can often be the rule rather than the exception, it would likely be difficult to have educational resources diverted from teaching the people the rudiments of their own language and instead used to teach "new" wordless pictorgraphic international language.

What appears to be called for, at least for the foreseeable future, is not, therefore, a substitute language (such as Semantography) which would require special educational efforts. Rather, a few supplementary and universally (and easily) understood graphic symbols that could be expanded through the appropriate use of a symbol and color grammar would probably be both more fruitful and more likely to succeed. The ideal system should be explicitly designed to minimize any special learning requirements in order that it might overcome the obstacles of illiteracy as well as those of language differences.

Standardization, Implementation and Control

If any graphic symbol system is to be effective it must meet four minimal criteria: each of its components must be unique, clear in meaning, independent of language and culture, and visually direct.[13] Few existing systems (or, indeed, individual symbols) meet these minimum criteria or the expanded criteria the International Committee for Breaking the Language Barrier (ICBLB) has proposed to be used in evaluating symbols. The ICBLB's criteria are as follows:

1. Is it easy to associate the symbol with its message?
2. Does the symbol fit different cultures and different local situations?
3. Does the symbol fit the changing times?
4. Is the symbol pleasing and acceptable without controversy?
5. Does the symbol conform with existing international standard symbols (or their elements)?
6. Is the symbol (or its element) capable of systematic application for a variety of interrelated concepts?
7. Is the symbol easily reproducible? Is it applicable for many different purposes?
8. Is the symbol distinguishable from other symbols?
9. Can the symbol be perceived from different distances and angles, under different light conditions?
10. Can the symbol withstand vandalism and contamination?[8]

In addition to meeting the criteria mentioned above, a system which can at least partially overcome the obstacles to international communications, as discussed earlier, must be standardized across countries. To develop, implement, and control (for without control, standard definitions, etc., could not be maintained) such a standardized system would require both the moral and active support of governments, international agencies, and private

organizations around the world. Efforts in that direction have already begun. The International Organization for Standardization (ISO), the International Committee for Breaking the Language Barriers (ICBLB), as well as "limited-purpose groups" (e.g., International Civil Aviation Organization, International Road Federation, etc.) and various national standards organizations have made attempts (both successful and unsuccessful) to lay the foundation for worldwide adoption of graphic symbols. The efforts of these organizations have been substantial, but have not lead to the development of a universally acceptable and understood graphic symbol system.

An Action Proposal

Any plan to develop and implement a truly acceptable and universal system of graphic symbols will have to overcome many obstacles past efforts in this direction have been unable to surmount. To succeed where others have fallen short, a symbol system should be developed and introduced within the following guidelines. First, each symbol or combination of symbols and colors must satisfy the basic structural criteria discussed earlier (i.e., each component as well as the overall system must be unique, clear in meaning, independent of language and culture, visually direct, and must also meet the criteria proposed by the ICBLB). Second, introduction of the system into practical use will have to be achieved without the benefit of pre-introduction educational-preparation of often illiterate publics. Therefore, initial applications should be as simple and straightforward as possible while still providing maximum opportunity for familiarity with--and use of--the system to spread as rapidly as possible. Finally, the system's design should be flexible enough to allow for its gradual expansion from relatively simple early applications to increasingly more complex uses requiring the introduction of new symbols, colors, and eventually a symbol grammar.

An Enormous Task

The magnitude of the proposed task is such that it is unlikely that any firm or organization operating alone could accomplish it satisfactorily. In fact, the choice and use of graphic symbols on an individual basis has led to the proliferation of symbols without any real progress toward widespread public understanding or international standardization. The individual approach has probably been partially responsible for research evidence indicating that most people are unable to understand many simple and widely used graphic symbols.

What appears to be called for is a large-scale, highly coordinated, cooperative, international effort. Participants should include interested international organizations such as the ISO and ICBLB; national organizations; multi-market groups such as the EEC; and multinational business organizations such as giant U.S., European, and Japanese multinationals and trading companies. While support and cooperation of all these groups is necessary, the active support, leadership and involvement of major international business organizations is critical to the success of this undertaking. A brief outline of how this project could be launched and the role to be played by the international business community is presented below.

An International Conference

To insure sufficient international interest, support, and cooperation, the project should be launched with a highly visible and prestigious conference. This conference probably should be convened under the sponsorship of an interested and respected international organization--perhaps an agency of the United Nations, World Bank, or comparable institution. Once begun, however, the actual task of developing and implementing the symbol system would necessarily fall more into the hands of the business participants.

Otherwise, the end result of the conference might be a very general call for "someone" to do "something" with little prospect of anything concrete emerging. The international business community can "get the job done," and therefore, should have substantial instrumental involvement in the project from its beginning. The continued support of the non-business members would also be essential to the credibility of the project as well as to help "pave the way" for the ultimate introduction of the symbol system into general use.

A primary objective of the conference should be to establish a "permanent" working committee to oversee the actual development and eventual introduction of an internationally acceptable symbol system. Members of this committee should include representatives of all interested parties included in the original conference as well as symbol and communication experts. Members representing the international business community should be expected to provide necessary direction, motivation, and resources, especially competent and internationally experienced personnel. There are some recent interesting examples of business involvement in similar public interest projects. For example, many large firms provided key personnel to assist New York City during its financial crisis. Also, the long-range disruptive influence of large-scale "barter" transactions with Eastern bloc nations is reportedly to be investigated by a group of corporate planners from Western multinationals and officials from those nations.

Development and Introduction

The working committee should initially be charged with responsibilities for the development of a system of graphic symbols consistent with all the applicable criteria set down earlier. Proper attention to detail and exhaustive world-wide testing during the development process itself should help reduce many difficulties which might otherwise be encountered as the

symbol system is gradually introduced into general use. Once development is accomplished, attention should turn to the design and supervision of an introduction program. Such a program should take the symbol system through its first relatively simple applications to its ultimate acceptance as a supplemental, non-word-based, written commercial language.

The introduction phase is probably one of the most critical to the ultimate accomplishment of the project's objectives. Its success is likely to rest almost entirely in the hands of the international business community--both by necessity and by design. Significant volumes of relevant world commerce flows directly or indirectly through a relatively small number of very large multi-national business organizations. If these firms (many of which would, hopefully, have been part of the project from the beginning) would agree to simultaneously put the symbol system into use for marking shipments, identifying hazardous substances, etc., its early visibility would be assured. Symbolically marked cartons and packages of all sizes and descriptions would soon be passing through harbours and airports in virtually every corner of the world. The firms involved would need only to inform their own employees, via their normal internal communications system, of the reasons for the adoption of the symbol system and provide them with brief symbol dictionaries.

The obstacles presented international firms by language differences and illiteracy can initially be most easily overcome in the relatively straightforward applications presented by handling and shipping instructions, and product hazard warnings, e.g., poisons and flammables. It is also in these similar applications, because of their extreme importance in day-to-day commercial activities, that substantial and almost immediate benefits could be derived from use of a simple system of internationally standardized symbols.

Once the system is in general use, many persons outside the firms directly participating in the project would begin to gain familiarity with and understanding of the basic symbols simply through constant and repeated exposure to them. If international giants such as Nestle, Unilever, Revlon, Coca Cola, Ford, Mitsui, Proctor and Gamble, Colgate Palmolive, Volkswagen, General Motors, and similar firms were to take the lead by adopting the system, thousands of smaller firms would no doubt follow.

Expansion

As the symbol system gains acceptance and recognition in its initial applications, its use should be gradually expanded into more demanding situations such as those presented by the subtle information requirements of package design, product labeling, point-of-purchase promotion, product care and use instructions, etc. The system should be moved into these areas only as rapidly as the symbols become sufficiently comprehendible to the relevant publics involved. Each extension of the system into increasingly sophisticated application areas necessarily implies new and more diverse publics becoming involved in its use. Ultimately, international consumers would become both familiar and comfortable with the symbols. It is at this final stage that the symbol system could truly begin to function as a supplemental international language.

The innovating firms, in addition to their very critical and central role in the introduction process, could also significantly speed the pace of the symbol system's expansion into relatively complex areas. They could accomplish this by making serious efforts, as part of their normal promotional and advertising campaigns, to educate their publics in the use of the system as it begins to "catch hold." They might, for example, distribute with packaged consumer goods inserts including brief "dictionaries" of the various symbols

in use. They might also, at the same time, make similar materials available to educational systems in areas of the world in which they are heavily involved.

Monitoring and Control

A graphic symbol system, just as any other living language, must adjust to changing times and conditions. If the system is to remain internationally standardized as it evolves, it must be subjected to some form of monitoring and control. It is suggested that a small permanent organization, perhaps a subcommittee of some regular international body or a descendant of the original developmental committee, be established and empowered to serve as a standardizing body. This body would ensure that the symbol system, cum language, develops along lines consistent with the criteria which guided its original development.

Concluding Remarks

With the support of major international business organizations, an aggressive and committed campaign to develop and introduce into general use an internationally standardized system of graphic symbols should achieve its initial objectives in perhaps a decade. The world would then be in possession of a functioning basic symbol system which over the years could be expanded into a working non-word-based supplemental language valuable to business, governments, and consumers. Once such a system is functioning and its practical value has been demonstrated, its survival is likely to be assured. Given sufficient applications it could very easily reach the point in the near future where it would gradually be introduced into the basic educational process world-wide. A world educated and trained to use such a system could expect to benefit substantially from expanding its applicability into areas beyond those directly associated with commercial activities.

Fortunately, in the quest for a universal system of graphic symbols, unlike many other situations requiring international cooperation, there are not likely to be any "losers." All interested parties stand to gain from the development and widespread acceptance of such a system. Therefore, no nation, firm, or organization should feel threatened by any steps which might be taken in this direction. As a consequence, no significant opposition, other than old-fashioned apathy and a lack of initial interest, is likely to stand in the way of any vigorous effort to launch the project. All that is now required is a pool of interest sufficiently large, sincere, and influential to "get things moving."

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FOOTNOTES

1. Henry Dreyfuss, Symbol Sourcebook (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1972), p. 18.

2. Ibid, pp. 98-99.

3. Ibid, p. 101.

4. Ibid, p. 158.

5. Rudolf Modley, "World Language Without Words." Journal of Communication 24 (4), Autumn, 1974, p. 59.

6. Compiled from Faber Birren, The Story of Color (Westport, Comm.: The Crimson Press, 1941), pp. 323-325 and Dreyfuss, pp. 234-246.

7. Dreyfuss, p. 231.

8. Ibid.

9. Elizabeth S. Helfman, Signs and Symbols Around the World (New York: Lothrop, Lee & Shepard, 1967), p. 155.

10. Charles K. Bliss, "One Writing For One World," Symbol Sourcebook, Henry Dreyfuss, ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1972), pp. 22-23.

11. Marie Neurath, "Education Through the Eye," Symbol Sourcebook, Henry Dreyfuss, ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1972), pp. 24-25.

12. Ibid.

13. Soichi Kato, "A New Universal Language for the New Human Environment," In Proceedings: International Conference on Highway Sign Symbology, (Washington, D.C.: International Road Federation and U.S. Department of Transportation, June 5-6, 1972), p. 60.

Exhibit 1 - Examples of Visual Instructions for Shipping and Handling Goods

English Content Instructions and Their Graphic Symbol Counterparts

Perishables

Live Animals

Noxious

English Handling Instructions and Their Graphic Symbol Counterparts

Fragile

This Way Up

Keep Frozen

Graphic symbols like those above, when placed on goods, can help insure proper handling of goods in countries where handlers might not understand normal written instructions. Notice the directness with which these symbols can communicate the nature of the goods being shipped and how they should be handled.

Exhibit 2 - Examples of Visual Instructions
for Care of Clothing

English Clothing Care Instructions and
Their Graphic Symbol Counterparts

Do Not Wash

Drip Dry

Dry Flat

Graphic symbols like those above, when placed on clothing labels, can help insure proper care of clothing items sold in the international marketplace. Consumer satisfaction with such clothing items can be enhanced by the knowledge of how to take care of them that is communicated directly and quickly by easily understood graphic symbols.

Exhibit 3 - Examples of Visual Instructions
for Vehicle Operation

English Instructions for Vehicle Operation
and Their Graphic Symbol Counterparts

Fuel

Brake

Ignition Switch

Owners of automobiles manufactured in foreign countries are already aware of the use of graphic symbols like those above to communicate basic information about their cars. Graphic symbols on dashboards of cars quickly enable drivers to find headlight, windshield wiper and other operating switches. Standardization of these symbols could help drivers to quickly adapt to any vehicle regardless of its origin. Consumer satisfaction, convenience and safety to be derived from the use of graphic symbols to communicate basic vehicle operating information are important practical benefits for the international marketer.

Exhibit 4 - Symbolism of Colors Red, Blue and Yellow

Origin of Meaning	Red	Blue	Yellow
Hebrew	Sacrafice Sin	Glory	Marriage
France	Aristocrat	Slavery	Criminal Felon
Japan	Fighting Anger Danger	Villain Ghostly Fiends	Childish Gay
England	Medical Profession	--	Science
United States	Love	Boyish	Cowardice
China	Fire South Happiness	Mongolians	Earth Chinese
Egypt	Pride	Faith Truth Virtue	Color of the Asiatic Race
Emotional	Hot Dry Solid Substantial	Cold West Transparent	Incandescent Spatial
Graphic Symbol	Square Cube	Circle Sphere	Triangle
Summary	Favorite color of all peoples	Second favorite color of all peoples	Sun

Exhibit 5 - Semantography

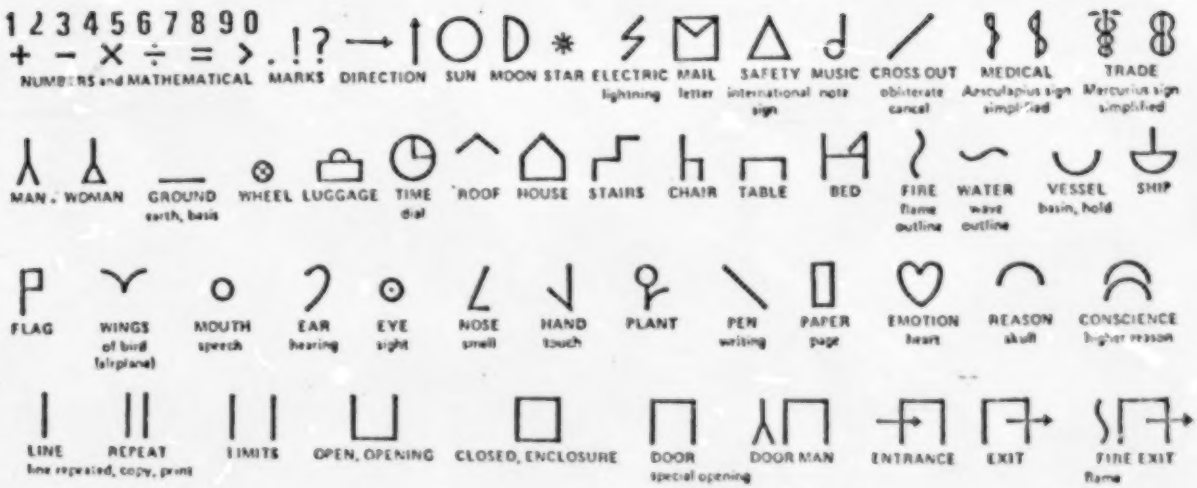

Exhibit 6 - ISOTYPE Pictographs